PA Pointers
'It's on the Internet' doesn't make it true

by John D. Banusiewicz, Defense Information School

Some time after TWA Flight 800 went down off Long Island, N.Y., in July of 1996, journalist Pierre Salinger damaged his credibility by claiming to have a "secret government document" that proved the U.S. Navy shot the airliner out of the sky. As it turned out, his document was nothing more than a letter, written by an airline pilot, that had been circulating freely on the Internet for months.

Perhaps sensing his credibility could only be restored if his allegation proved to be true, Salinger apparently had no choice but to further embarrass himself by hooking up with a gang of professional conspiracy theorists to put together a report that was wholly refuted by the government and widely ridiculed for its shabbiness by professional news organizations.

No babe in the woods, Salinger was President Kennedy's press secretary and worked for ABC News for many years thereafter. But if a heavy hitter like that can fall victim to believing something because he found it on the Internet, what about the relative neophytes who are military journalists?

The World Wide Web can be a great research tool but, like any tool, it can be dangerous in the hands of someone who doesn't know how to use it correctly. Journalists being burned by using questionable source material without cross-checking it is nothing new. But the Internet makes it easier than ever for anyone to "publish" anything, so it has exponentially expanded the body of questionable source material that's out there. It's easy for a sloppy researcher or someone with an ax to grind to package bad information well, thus giving it the appearance of being credible. When we did most of our research using printed sources, source credibility was easier to establish because it was harder for purveyors of nonsense to reach the mass market. That's not the case any more.

Put some healthy skepticism to work. This is a good habit to develop.

Of course, the best defense against getting bad information from the web is to stick with sites you'd expect to be credible and to verify information you plan to use by visiting other credible sites or using other more traditional means. @

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Internet sources — how to find out who's behind them

Journalists and researchers have always had to check their sources. This rule is easy to forget while speeding across cyberspace, especially when the information we encounter looks and sounds professional. While it takes several resources to create a professional-looking book, newspaper or magazine, an open phone line, a few clicks of the mouse and taps on the keyboard will create a forum for pranksters and those who are misinformed.

There are a few things to keep in mind before trusting information you find on the World Wide Web. Look up the source behind the site – everyone who owns a domain has to register it with a Network Information Center, or NIC, for the domain to be reachable. Fortunately, this data is publicly available. All a researcher has to do is go to the relevant NIC and type in the domain name.

For all ".com" addresses, one can look up names at http://www.networksolutions.com/cgi-bin/whois/whois. For all other domain names try http://www.allwhois.com. The address, name, etc., of the site owner may give you specific clues as to their reliability. For example, if you read this on the Internet and wanted to verify its truth, the owner of the domain would be Air Force Research Laboratory. If the owner was Kermit the Frog at Sesame Street, you may want to look elsewhere for your information. You are typically given enough information by the NIC to look up the owner's name in the phone book. There is also a small, free program called "Alexa" that will display the information one would find at the aforementioned sites at the bottom of your display screen. If interested, visit http://www.alexa.com to download the program.